

"Wisdom River brings emotions of  
great peace, wellbeing, and wonder."

—Glenn Brackett, *Bamboo Rodsmith,  
Sweetgrass Rods*

SAMPLE PAGES

MEDITATIONS ON FLY FISHING  
AND LIFE MIDSTREAM

# WISDOM RIVER

LARRY KAPUSTKA PHD

CHAD OKRUSCH PHD

EDITORS

FOREWORD BY GREG SHYBA



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FOREWORD

ESPRIT DE CORPS

*Greg Shyba*

*I have never seen a river that I could not love.  
Moving water...has a fascinating vitality.  
It has power and grace and associations.  
It has a thousand colors and a thousand shapes,  
yet it follows laws so definite that the tiniest streamlet  
is an exact replica of a great river.*

— Roderick Haig-Brown

I HOPE YOU ENJOY this collection of stories about rivers and the varied interactions depicted. Fly fishing in many of the essays is a vehicle to express a reverence for the many gifts we receive along and in the rivers and cricks. As a fellow fly fishing enthusiast, I am pleased to see this outstanding collection go to print with each chapter being a reflection of the pleasures, challenges and life lessons found in time spent on rivers.

My own lifelong enthusiasm for fishing began when I was around five years old on trips to the famous Blue Ribbon Bow River east of Calgary with my dad. Now, fishing with my own kids and grandkids has become an important part of my family's culture and, in my case, it led me to a career in conservation.

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Within these pages, the reader will find stories that catch the essence of fly fishing: the rise, the take and bringing a fish to hand but, most of all, being in close touch with nature. For many anglers, the concentration required to be successful takes their minds away from the stress in their lives. I know of several fly fishers whose love of the sport has taken priority over their jobs and families in their pursuit of the wily trout.

Although fly fishing is a solitary activity which lends itself to introspection, there is a certain *esprit de corps* shared by fly fishers. It is something organic that can be found deep within the soul of fly fishers. I have seen and been part of life-long relationships spawned from the love of fly fishing. I believe it is deeper than that of other sports or hobbies. And as they say, a lot of time is spent, planning and discussing what it will take to fool a fish with a brain the size of a pea.

Fly fishing can be exciting and disappointing when the angler can't "match the hatch," although some anglers will study the water for hours without casting a line, hoping to make that one cast in the hope that the weight of a fish will be on the line, even if for only a moment. Others I have fished with will stay on the water long into the night muttering to themselves and others, "Just one more cast!"

As this collection of stories reflects, not only anglers enjoy time spent on rivers. Others, such as bird watchers and those drifting by on a canoe, also enjoy viewing



Greg Shyba with framed fly fishing memorabilia  
from boyhood fishing trips.

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all that nature offers on or along its riverbanks. It has been said that to protect a river, it needs many friends. As you read through the book, I am sure you will recognize the passion of these writers through their unique account of experiences on their water.

Tight lines and happy reading!

—*Greg Shyba, CEO,  
Ann & Sandy Cross Conservation Area,  
Calgary, Alberta 2023*

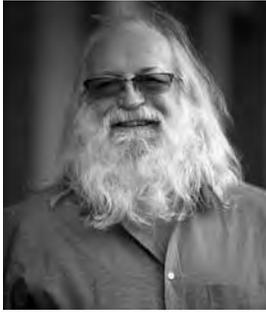
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## INTRODUCTION

### WATER

*Larry Kapustka and Chad Okrusch*



Dr. Larry Kapustka  
Diamond Valley, Alberta



Dr. Chad Okrusch  
Butte, Montana

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**W**ATER IS PRECIOUS, essential for life, and inspirational. We are drawn to rivers and lakes not just for the basic needs of survival, but also for recreational and spiritual replenishment, a calming of our psyche, an opportunity to encounter nature in all its glory. The motion of water can be mesmerizing, whether the turbulent flow over cataracts or the soothing flow in a deep pool. When one is on the water, the chance encounter with Brother Bear, a timid fawn, or a soaring osprey builds everlasting memories.

Even though the water that flows in streams and rivers represents a mere 0.002 percent of Earth's water, it plays an outsized role for most of us. While one can feel the energy

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of the sun and hear the wind shake quaking aspen leaves, there is something about struggling to stand firm in the onrush of moving water as it works its way downstream that makes the earth's energy palpable in a singular way.

The magic of moving water and the animals that reside in streams and rivers is the source of inspiration for the collection of stories and poems in this book. The authors bring together a richness of experiences, some drawing life lessons gained from being knee-deep in flowing waters. Many stories focus on fly fishing for trout, but like Norman Maclean's "A River Runs Through It," the act of fly fishing is merely a vehicle to tell deeper stories.

We open with Jim McLennan's tribute to esteemed fly fishing experts who wrote eloquently about the blue-ribbon trout streams of Montana that compelled mostly boys and young men to dream of the day they would ply these magical places. As Jim tells of his journey, one is led to conclude that there are other places, other rivers that yield larger and more trout than the revered Montana streams. Yet, the aura that surrounds the iconic Montana Rivers prevails. This theme returns in the memories shared by Chris Pibus and David McCumber.

A common thread that emerges from all the authors, even those who focused on the art of fly fishing, is that time on the water evokes much more than landing a beautiful cuttie, bow, brook, or brown. There are echoes of John Denver's "serenity of a clear blue mountain lake" in the poems by Doc Mehl and Doris Daley. There are stories in essays by Pat Munday and poems by Doc and Doris of precious natural resources lost to greed and arrogance. There are also hopeful expressions in the story about Iris, a resident osprey, by Kaitlynn Okrusch. There are poignant love stories recounted by Kayla Lappin, Paul Vang, Jerry Kustich,

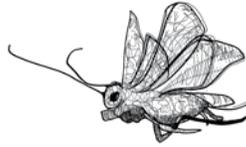
David McCumber, and John McKee—each linked to adventures on streams. Beyond the life’s lessons shared in these tales, there are suggestions for your next dining experience with recipes for the rivershore campfire and for elegant dining room table spreads.

The stories told in this book are drawn from Alberta and Montana, with a photography gallery of images by Tim Foster from Nova Scotia. Artwork by Tyler Rock (glass bull trout), additional photos by Mike Forbister, and chapter heading drawings by Rich Th  roux provide depth to this production.

Wisdom River is both real and imagined—a metaphor that draws in precious memories and inspirations. The real place, shown on maps as the “Big Hole” in Montana, was initially named “Wisdom River” in 1806 by Lewis and Clark, who were commissioned by Thomas Jefferson to find a water route to the Pacific Ocean.

Wisdom Rivers exist wherever we are learning on their banks—the Tigris and the Nile; the Columbia and the Amazon; the Mackenzie, the McKenzie and the Bow—all are Wisdom Rivers. Every headwater stream, every Fish, Willow, and Rock Creek brings wisdom. Most of the work herein was inspired by fishing for trout. Sometimes the fishers are fly fishing, sometimes they’re fish hawks, and in at least one chapter no one is fishing at all.

—Larry Kapustka, *Diamond Valley, Alberta*  
Chad Okrusch, *Butte, Montana*  
2023



ONE

## ALMOST MONTANA

*Jim McLennan*

*Mystique:*

*“A quality of mystery, glamour, or power associated  
with someone or something.”*

IT WAS AROUND 1965 when my parents announced we would be taking a fishing trip from our home in Alberta to meet up with a couple of my dad’s old school pals whom he hadn’t seen in fifty or so years. The trip was to Cooke City, Montana, just outside the northeast corner of Yellowstone Park.

We fished some streams nearby, including the Lamar River and Slough Creek in the Park, dangling worms behind a lead weight. We cast into the moving water and let the worms hang in the current near an undercut bank till a trout took hold. The fish, cutthroats, I seem to remember, were taken back to the motel, fried up, and enjoyed.

Though this trip included little or no fly fishing, it came along at a time when I was developing a mostly unexplainable interest in fly fishing. I had been reading about it, primarily in two books that someone had loaned to my father. One was *The Trout Fisherman's Bible* by Dan Holland. I can still recall and recite nearly verbatim the photo captions in this book.

One of them, beneath a photo of a huge brown trout from the Madison River, read, "Anyone can tell at a glance that this old boy was king of the pool." The other book, with even more powerful influence, was "Trout," by Ray Bergman. Published in 1938, it contained compelling and instructive writing with frequent references to Montana's Madison and Firehole Rivers, especially in a chapter titled "Experiences with the Dry Fly."

The alignment of these two things—reading about Montana and going there to fish—was how I initially came under the spell of Big Sky Country.

Later, likely in the pages of the "big three" magazines—*Field & Stream*, *Outdoor Life*, and *Sports Afield*—I became aware of the fishing and writing of fly-fishing's trail blazer, Joe Brooks. He appeared to be a slightly more contemporary writer who also extolled the virtues of Montana. I saw a photo of him displaying, as I recall, an eight-pound brown trout from the Yellowstone River, caught on a streamer, likely a Muddler Minnow.

In those years, and after, it seemed that everywhere I turned in the outdoor and fly-fishing press I saw Montana-this and Yellowstone Park-that stories. It appeared that if an outdoor magazine aimed to maximize newsstand sales, all it had to do was find a reason to put the word "Montana" somewhere on the cover.

Another significant book came to my attention several

years later, titled *Larger Trout for the Western Fly Fisher-  
man*, by Charles E. Brooks, who resided—yes, you guessed  
it—near West Yellowstone, Montana. His writings in this  
and subsequent books, such as *The Trout and the Stream*,  
*The Living River*, a biography of the Madison, were focused  
on the area around Yellowstone Park.

Other writers were also jumping on the Montana band-  
wagon, including Ernest Schwiebert, who held the title of  
the “world’s leading fly fisher,” for a time, Dave Whitlock,  
Gary Borger, and others of influence and celebrity.

Even Montana’s tackle stores were revered. Fly shops  
like Bud Lilly’s and Pat Barnes’ in West Yellowstone, and  
particularly Dan Bailey’s in Livingston, were as famous as  
the trout streams nearby. To young impressionable fly fish-  
ers, it somehow felt important to get our tackle from these  
places: “You got a new rod? Where’d you get it?” “Dan Bai-  
ley’s catalog.”

Years later, when I finally visited Bailey’s store, I did  
what every first-timer through that door did: I stared at  
the racks of rods, the walls of fly-tying material, and espe-  
cially at the “Wall of Fame.” On this wall, wooden outlines  
of one huge trout after another were displayed, many of  
them caught by my fly-fishing heroes such as Lee Wulff, Joe  
Brooks, Charles Waterman, Dave Whitlock, Gary Borger,  
and more and more. The realization that all these people  
had undoubtedly stood in this place and likewise gawked  
at this wall was inspiring. Towards the back of the shop,  
there was a room where the magic was created—rows of  
women fly tiers cranking out Royal Wulffs, Muddlers, and  
Spuddlers by the score. In more recent times, a beautiful  
wooden drift boat has reposed in the front of the store.

I don’t think I was aware of it, but I was not the only  
impressionable person being swept into the seductive

realm of Montana fly fishing. By the 1970s, Montana had taken firm hold throughout the North American fly-fishing culture and community. The cumulative effect was that we believed—because so many experts had said so—that the best fly fishing in North America, perhaps in the world, was in Montana.

So, this young Canadian kid, now completely obsessed by fly fishing, yearned to fish these rivers with these people's flies and methods, important and requisite steps in a pilgrimage of sorts, a rite of passage into the world of "real" fly fishing.

By the late 1960s, I had completed high school, was fresh into the freedom of a driver's license, and was finally able to do nearly as much fishing as reading about it. In October of 1970 I fished an Alberta river named the Bow, downstream of the soon-to-burgeon city of Calgary. In my early years on the river, the small number of fly fishers there fished mainly streamers and caught mainly rainbow trout, most of them between 16 and 22 inches long. I thought this was very good fishing, but as a Canadian I knew I had to be missing something. How could fishing be this good and not be in Montana?

A revelation occurred one day in the mid-1970s, when I was on a fly-fishing vacation to—yes—Montana. I went to get the genuine stuff you see, not the made-in-Alberta imitation. I was absorbing the atmosphere and essence of real fly fishing by hanging around in Bud Lilly's Trout Shop in West Yellowstone.

I waited patiently till the other customers were otherwise occupied and then nervously asked the man behind the counter—Bud himself—how the fishing had been recently. "Pretty good," he replied. "A fellow caught an 18-incher in the Madison two weeks ago." This answer struck me oddly. I

thought, “An 18-incher two weeks ago? That’s news? Here? In Montana? On the Madison River?” It hit me funny because I was pretty sure somebody would have caught an 18-incher back home on the Bow within the last hour.

I began guiding fly fishers on the Bow in about 1975. I got the job because I had fished the river some and had my summers off from the University of Alberta. We continued to fish mainly streamers, but one day, perhaps because it was a new occurrence or perhaps because I’d simply become more observant, I began to find these big fish feeding on the surface, eating mayflies that seemed to be pale morning duns. Later that season I saw another mayfly I’d recently read about in *Fly Fisherman* magazine. These were Trico-rhodes—“tricos” or “trikes” to the hep fly fishers—and the Bow’s rainbows were eating them by the mouthful in gentle riffles each morning. There were also stifling hatches of caddisflies every evening near dark.

My appreciation for the quality of our fishing was confirmed further when I found myself guiding several of my heroes on the Bow. Those same fly-fishing writers who had convinced me of Montana’s incontestable virtue, including Brooks, Borger, and Schwiebert, were now raving about an Alberta river. Perhaps it was then that I forsook my Canadian instinct to apologize for how good the fishing was on the Bow.

But here’s the thing. The fishing I had and still have near home in Alberta is as good as that in most of Montana, but I still go to Montana to fish. People ask me why. They ask if it’s better than Alberta. It’s not a matter of better I tell them; it’s a matter of different. For me, at least, it’s a chance to step into the waters I read about as a kid, to experience again the streams that were formative to my fly-fishing education and passion.

Even now it sounds sacrilegious to say it, but the truth is that there is comparable and even better fishing in some places sometimes than that in Montana. But those places are not in Montana, and I guess that's my point. All aspects of North American fly fishing, from the aesthetics of the settings to the quality of the fish, to the bug hatches and the sport's significance to local culture, are unofficially measured against the "Montana Scale." Whether it has the best fly fishing or not doesn't matter anymore. For a fly angler today, there is still no other place with such mystique and attraction, and no other assemblage of syllables that carries the charisma, anticipation, and inexorable pull, as Mon-ta-na.



*Jim McLennan was one of the first fly-fishing guides on Alberta's Bow River, and is a well-known outdoor writer and speaker. He is the author of five books on fly fishing, including his latest book, Trout Tracks. He is contributing editor for Fly Fisherman and Fly Fusion magazines. Jim is also co-host, along with Derek Bird, of Fly Fusion Television, a series broadcast on the World Fishing Network.*

WISDOM RIVER

FOUR



POEMS AND MUSINGS

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*Doris Daley*

*Al (Doc) Mehl*

*Larry Kapustka*

*Chad Okrusch*



## WILLOW CREEK

---

*Doris Daley*

You'd think a prairie girl's memories would  
scratch like wheat chaff.  
smell like hay,  
howl like a Chinook wind blasting off the  
mountains  
and taste like wild saskatoons picked on a hot  
July day.  
And you'd be right.

Yet my first memories float up from the little  
creek that ran below the house.

I lost my glasses in that creek and—a  
miracle!—found them two days later in  
the mud below the stepping stones.  
I saw my dad, wearing nothing more than  
his underwear and a cowboy hat, wade  
through chest-deep pools to rescue a calf  
stranded by a flood.

We built rafts out of rotted fence posts and  
baler twine, sailed to magical coves rife with  
pirates, and were home in time for supper.  
Beaver, deer, kids, minnows and frogs lived a  
rich aquatic life in that ancient, meandering  
creek.

The farm house, the color of buffalo beans, is  
gone now. Sold for scrap.  
No school bus comes down the road anymore.  
No kids.  
The old granary burned down in the '96 fire.  
The hay field is rented out now; nobody can  
afford the machinery.

Only the creek is still there. Will always be there.  
Or will it? The new owners want to subdivide.

## THE MOTHER

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*Al (Doc) Mehl*

If you have seen the river,  
Then you have seen the Mother.

If you have seen the rainbow,  
Spanning the gorge,  
Spanning the ages,  
Casting the refracted rays of an unseen sun,  
Then you have seen the Mother.

If you have seen the sky afire,  
Peach-red glow over the black mountain  
embers,  
Fanned by the desert winds, not yet aflame  
But ready to burst impending inferno,  
Then you have known the Mother.

If you the seen the sacred datura,  
Waved away the insistent sphinx moth in  
dusk's low light,

And smelled the musty invitation of the  
unfolding petals,  
Gazed upon the lily-white bloom that has  
burst upon the early night  
As if to steal the thunder from the moon,  
Then you have stood beside the Mother.

If you have known the mole,  
If you have known the turtle,  
If you have tasted of the fertile harvest,  
Then you have walked with the Mother.

If you have seen the river,  
If you have met the river,  
If you have known the river,

Then you have known the Mother.





*Bull Trout*

Glass and Slate.

Artist: Tyler Rock

Firebrand Glass Studio, Diamond Valley, Alberta

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## MEDITATION ON FRESH WATER, ETHICS & BULL TROUT

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*Chad Okrusch*

fresh water, bull trout  
cold, clear, complex, connected  
both precious and rare

WHEN ED ABBEY said we needed more predators, he wasn't talking about bull trout. He was talking about charismatic megafauna—grizzlies, wolves, cougars, and such. But I like to think that if Abbey had ever watched a 30-inch bull trout devour a wounded spring run Chinook salmon, or a runt-gosling, he'd have included this voracious predator on his list of species we need more of.

By 1999, bull trout made a different list: the list of threatened and endangered species. In Montana in the Flathead basin, biologists counted 1,152 bull trout in 1982. By 2023 this population had declined to 493. In Alberta, despite the fact that the bull trout is the provincial fish emblem, they are classified as “Threatened” under the *Wildlife Act*. Suffice to say that throughout their entire native range—roughly, the ecoregion we call the Pacific Northwest and parts of Western Canada—bull trout are on the brink.

We simply do not value them as we do other species.

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In terms of aesthetics, many fish are more handsome than the big-headed bull trout. They were not blessed with visual beauty like rainbow or Yellowstone cutthroat.

Bull trout are of no use to us in terms of economics. They mature slowly, live long, maintain small predator-sized populations, and require complex habitat. In short, humans have little regard for bull trout because they can't be mass produced in the machinery of industrial hatcheries.

Many anglers trained in utility still consider bull trout a trash fish because they are piscivores—they eat other, valuable fish—like exotic summer runs of salmon.

Once upon a time, fishing guides on Oregon's McKenzie River caught and killed bull trout—for the good of the river. They hung them from bridges and barbed wire fences—like coyotes—and encouraged others to do the same.

But bull trout have value beyond human notions of aesthetics, economics, or utility. They have what Aldo Leopold called intrinsic value—value in-and-of-themselves. They have value just because they are.

Ecology has provided us yet another way to value bull trout—as an indicator of a robust system. Among all salmonids, bull trout may require the most pristine environment. Those who know refer to the bull trout's habitat needs refer to them as the 4Cs: cold, clear, complex, and connected.

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Bull trout are thermally sensitive and live in streams that run clear and cold. They require complex habitat—lots of cover, large woody debris, boulders, undercut banks, and gravel spawning beds. They need riffles, runs, and pools. And, in order to continue existing, bull trout populations must be connected. Sadly, most are not.

One ten-thousandth of all water on Earth moves over land as rivers. Of all the river systems in the world, few are cold, clear, complex, and connected enough to support populations of wild bull trout. Even fewer exist in the bull trout's native range. We ought to value these places and these fish for no other reason than they continue to exist—in spite of us.

Rivers sustain us—humans and bull trout—regardless of how beautiful we are, or how much we contribute to the economy, or how useful we may be. In the grand scheme of things, our value is derived not from these factors, but from our very existence and from the sacred roles we play in natural systems.



WISDOM RIVER

EIGHT



GALLERY OF  
PHOTOGRAPHY

---

*Photos by Tim Foster*

*Alex Kielburger and Jon Foster  
of Wild Valley Supply Co.  
enjoying a warm autumn day  
out on the river and SUP fly fishing in  
Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia.*



*Wisdom River cover image is also  
by Tim Foster.*



WISDOM RIVER

TWELVE



THE TOTAL FISHING  
EXPERIENCE

*Story and Recipes by Larry Kapustka  
Photos by Mike Forbister.*

*Line to Table*

*Recipes*

*Shore Lunch*

*Trout Almondine*

*Lavender Infused Sturgeon, Halibut,  
Cod, or Lake Whitefish*





RECIPE PHOTOS: MIKE FORBISTER

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## SHORE LUNCH

There is something special that comes with the experience of a shoreline meal. It can be semi-elaborate or strikingly primitive.

### INGREDIENTS

Freshly caught legal fish (filleted or steaked)

Cast iron frying skillet (lid optional)

Serving pan to hold cooked vegetables

Cooking oil

A Stick of Butter ( 1/4 cup)

Potatoes (one per person)

One large onion (white or yellow)

Carrots (one per person)

Can of Corn (or 1/2 ear per person)

One lemon

Salt

Coarse ground black pepper

One egg

*For Options:* coarse corn meal or batter

Premix flour, salt, pepper, baking soda and baking powder.

*See instruction later for making a beer batter by stirring in an egg and beer.*



The first order of business is to catch the right-sized fish, not too big for your party and importantly, legal to harvest on the body of water you are fishing. On the primitive end of the spectrum, an unplanned lunch can provide a nice break. Start

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*cont...*

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a fire, remove the guts and gills of the fish, attach the cleaned fish to a stick of some sort (willow works well), and roast the fish over the open fire. Don't have a nice stick? Perhaps there is a flat-ish rock you can heat up and then lay the fish on. It's a bonus if you managed to have salt and pepper.

A more elaborate and memorable shore lunch involves advanced planning and a commitment to trade a bit more than an hour of fishing time to partake in a communal feast. The pre-planning part involves packing a cast iron skillet, a lid or foil, a slug of oil, a bag of premixed batter, butter, salt and pepper, potatoes, onions, corn, and if you are so inclined, a bottle of your favorite white wine (if permitted).

You can either do the deed yourself, but for a more rounded experience, divide the labor among everyone in the party. While someone is preparing the fish, others can be gathering fuel, building the fire, or cutting vegetables.

Prepare fillets or steaks of the fish (your choice depending on the size of the fish and your preference). Sprinkle salt and pepper on the fish and hold until the vegetables have been cooked.

Construct a fire ring, round up dry branches and kindling, and get a nice fire going. While the fire is building coals, cut the potatoes, carrots, onions, and corn—whatever you brought to be ready to put in a skillet when the fire dies down. When the coals are glowing, put a good splash of oil (about 1/4 cup) in the cast-iron skillet and place on the coals. Once the oil is hot, add the potatoes and carrots and cover. A splash

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of water added to the pan will speed cooking. Check that the potatoes are browning not burning, and when nearly done, add the onions, and corn; cover and cook for another five minutes or so until fork tender. Add salt and pepper to taste. Transfer from the skillet to a serving pan and cover to keep warm.

*Cornmeal option*—mix a couple of handfuls of coarse corn meal with salt and coarse-ground black pepper. After the vegetables have been transferred to the serving pan, add butter to the skillet and heat. Dredge the fillets or steaks in the seasoned corn meal and place these in the melted butter. Cooking time will depend on the thickness of the fillets or steaks. As above, avoid burning. When golden brown, turn the fish onto the other side and cook until done (flaky). Serve with a wedge of lemon if you thought to bring some, and the potato mix.

*Beer Batter Option* – Add beer (or water) and one egg to the prepared dry mix to achieve a consistency of pancake batter. Add enough oil to the skillet so that it is half inch deep. When the oil is hot but not smoking, dredge the fillets (or steaks) in the batter and carefully place in the oil (be careful to avoid splashing hot oil on yourself or onto the coals). When golden brown, turn and complete cooking. Serve with a wedge of lemon and the vegetable mix.

*Enjoy!*

Before leaving, douse the fire and double check that there are no remaining embers. And be damned sure to take all your trash with you!

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# WISDOM RIVER

## MEDITATIONS ON FLY FISHING & LIFE MIDSTREAM

*Wisdom River: Meditations on Fly Fishing and Life Midstream* is a collection of stories, poetry, photos, art, recipes, and jokes that celebrate the wonders of fly fishing and the wisdom that can be gained from spending time on the river. Contributors from Montana, Alberta, and Nova Scotia each bring a unique perspective and voice as they share adventures and memories from times they have spent riverside and midstream.

Story authors are Larry Kapustka, Chad Okrusch, Jim McLennan, Kaitlyn Okrusch, Pat Munday, Kayla Lappin, Jerry Kustich, Paul Vang, Greg Allard, David McCumber, Chris Pibus, Rayelynn Brandt, and John McKee.

Poets are Doris Daley, Al (Doc) Mehl, Larry Kapustka, and Chad Okrusch.

Photographers and artists are Tim Foster, Mike Forbister, Rich Th eroux, & Tyler Rock.



Cover Photo: Tim Foster  
Back Cover Photo: Pat Munday  
Book Design: Lorene Shyba



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