



Tight Lines

Jeff Helfrich

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Middle Fork of the Salmon River, Idaho

Cutthroat Extravaganza in the River of No Return Wilderness



By Steve Probasco

We coasted into the town of Stanley on fumes. I didn't account for the mountain driving and extreme elevation gain that we would encounter between Boise and our destination, Stanley. The last 50 miles or so were a bit tense. Too bad, because I couldn't fully enjoy the impressive mountain scenery laid out before me. Approaching Stanley, the rugged Sawtooths towered to the south, the setting sun lighting the granite walls in a spectacular wash of color. I could relax and appreciate the view even more after I pulled into the gas station.

Stanley, Idaho-population less than 100, elevation nearly 6,300 feet-is located on the upper Salmon River, about 130 miles northeast of Boise. For a small town, it's a hoppin' place during the summer months. River floaters and anglers come out of the woodwork to experience one of the West's best: the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Cindy, my wife, and I



were here to do the same. For the next six days we would be floating and fishing the river with Jeff Helfrich, of Jeff Helfrich Outfitters and Tightlines Fishing & Rafting. Helfrich is one of a few outfitters that exclusively use drift boats on the middle Fork for fishing. Having floated white-water rivers before, I was curious-and I must admit, a bit apprehensive- about doing so in such a craft. it was to be an adventure, for sure!

We met Jeff shortly after checking into the Mountain Village Resort. As expected, Jeff informed us the low-water situation of the past few years dictated that, instead of floating the entire river from Boundary Creek Landing to Cashe Bar Landing, near the confluence with the main-stem Salmon, we would fly into an airstrip at Indian Creek, cutting off the upper 25 miles of river. The upper miles were just too shallow to maneuver the fully loaded drift boats. The guides would bounce the boats down solo the previous day and meet us near the airstrip.

After all the logistics of the next morning were ironed out, Cindy and I walded over the Riverwear, the local "have-everything outdoors sports shop," and picked up a few last-minute items. Then it was a short walk down to the Casino Club for the best prime rib and libation in town. In fact, it was the best prime rib I have ever had-anywhere! After dinner, we took in some live, old-style rock 'n' roll at the Caino Club before making our way back to our room.

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

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The next morning, everyone on the week's adventure met outside the resort office and was transported the short distance to Stanley's dirt airstrip. A scenic 25-minute flight ferried our group to Indian Creek, where we found two more parties waiting to depart-grins fixed on nearly every face.

Before we began out float, everyone fist gathered to attend to the important instruction from a ranger regarding river safety and camping details. All the while, our gear was being loaded into the gear boat, a large pontoon craft that hauled the whole camp-tents, gear bags, kitchen food, two portable toilets, etc. After our lecture we all split up and headed to our assigned boats. Cindy and I had planned to take turns, each surrendering the fly rod to the other when we landed a fish. As it turned out, Cindy was consumed with enjoying the fantastic scenery, and I don't think she even picked up a rod the whole float. That worked out perfectly for me.

Immediately after shoving off, I began casting a hopper pattern toward the bank. Although there was still a morning chill in the air and the hoppers wouldn't be active for a few hours, our guide said it didn't matter; the fish would still rise to the imitations. he was right. Not 20 feet into our float I hooked my first Middle Fork west slope cutthroat trout.

It didn't take long to get my rhythm of casting and balancing in the bow of the drift boat, and after negotiating the first rapid, I had full confidence in the guide's-and the boat's-ability to tackle the river. As we bounced and bobbed along, I cast mindlessly, spending as much time looking at the towering cliffs and awesome backdrop as I did watching my drifting fly. Missing strikes under these circumstances just didn't seem to matter that much. It's a good thing-because I missed plenty of them.

THE RIVER



A drift boat negotiates one of the numerous falls on the Middle Fork Salmon River

The Middle Fork of the Salmon originates 20 miles northwest of Stanley, with the merging of Bear Valley and Marsh creeks. It travels 106 miles through one of the deepest gorges in North America. Eventually, it merges with the main Salmon River. The only signs of civilization are the few trails, private ranches, and landing strips that are found in the river gorge. There are no roads; the only way in is by air. This river is as remote as it gets in the Lower 48.

The Middle Fork is a fast, tumbling river that winds through a spectacular canyon, with towering cliffs throughout the float. The total distance we traveled was roughly 75 miles. Considered by many to be the finest wilderness float trip in the United States, it is also an incredibly prolific west slope cutthroat fishery, receiving the "Wild and Scenic River" designation in 1969 and becoming a catch-and-release stream in 1973.

The Middle Fork of the Salmon was home to Idaho's last free-living natives, known in the Shoshone language as *Tukudeka*, or Sheepeater—a literal name based on the 10,000-year history of hunting bighorn sheep on the canyon's ledges. Today, all that is left of the Sheepeaters' presence are numerous pictographs on the cliffs along the river and the telltale circular depressions in the ground where tepees marked hunting campsites.

Fall is the best time to fish in the Middle Fork. May, June, and, in some years, July finds the river too high and wild for fishing but ideal for the white-water enthusiast. And it is during these months that you will find the river crawling with rafters and kayakers seeking the numerous Class III to IV rapids found here. In fact, throughout its course, the river boasts roughly 70 rapids of Class II or greater.

The Middle Fork of the Salmon is located in the heart of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. At 2.3 million acres, it's the largest protected area in the continental United States.

It is possible to float the Middle Fork on your own, but you must first obtain a permit, which is available only through a lottery system. Because of the river's popularity and the number of applications in the lottery each year, the odds of getting drawn for a prime season float is about 1 in 20. If you really want to float or fish this river, your best bet is to go with an established outfitter. There are many outfitters working the river, most of whom are rafting/fishing outfitters; a complete list can be found on the Idaho Outfitters and Guides Web site, <http://www.ioqa.org>.



River access is strictly managed, and during the summer months, only seven group launches per day are allowed. Each party must stay in its preassigned campsite, which helps spread out parties along the river. The campsites are spacious, with plenty of room for large parties.

The river canyon hosts several species of animals. Bighorn sheep are the most common large animal found in this

rugged landscape. Along the river you will also see deer, beaver marten, mink, otter, and several other small critters. Chukar partridge and very common and can often be seen along the riverbank. The river itself hosts west slope cutthroat, with some Dolly Varden and a smattering of rainbows in the lower sections of the river. Some salmon and steelhead make their way back to the Middle Fork, but their arrival is long after the fishing and rafting season is over.

THE DAILY ROUTINE

Each day after breakfast the gear boat was again loaded up with the camp, and all the anglers were assigned a different guide than the previous day. Switching guides and boats made every day seem like a whole new adventure. All the guides working for Jeff bring many years of highly skilled experience on the river, as well as their own unique character. Their collective humor and congeniality are as colorful as the landscape. Dinners routinely flowed into wonderfully entertaining conversations with guides and fellow campers. Given sufficient libation, one of our guides could expertly and dramatically recite the works of Robert Service, the famous Alaska poet, to a captivated audience. And as the night wore on, late-night tales of every conceivable kind were prodded from whomever would speak.



While on the water the guides were no less accommodating and amusing—each an individual, and each with an interesting life off the river. What all the guides share in common is a passion for the river, and they truly love their jobs. Many of them have been working for Jeff on the Middle Fork for 20 years or more. Their impressive competence showed when they were behind the oars. There was never a tense moment negotiating the rapids, and they were always helpful to the guests—signs of a truly professional and dedicated crew.

On the water, you could fish or not, as much as you chose. Even though this was a fishing trip, after the first day, striking cliffs and wildlife, at least for me, rivaled the trout for my attention. Cindy remained engulfed in the beauty, delighted in every aspect of our trip despite a certain amount of pre-trip jitters expressed in anticipation of the high-adventure white-water boating. Her concern about having a thrill seeker's experience of a lifetime but not surviving to tell the tale was quickly laid to rest the first day.

CUTTHROAT APLENTY

Many people feel that the Middle Fork offers the best west slope cutthroat fishing in the United States. I'm not sure if this is so, but with my limited experience, I found cutthroat everywhere they should be: in from of rocks, behind rocks, along current seams, along the bank—all it took to get a rise was a properly presented fly.

All of our fishing was done out of the drift boats. With so much water to cover each day, we had to keep moving. Needless to say, only a very small fraction of the productive water (and it all seemed productive) got covered. A wading angler could have a hoot thoroughly fishing a stretch of river.

Our trip took place in early August—right in the middle of hopper season. As soon as we hit the water I tied on a Parachute Hopper and used that same pattern for the rest of the trip. I just kept using a hopper until it literally fell apart, and then I would tie on another. I found no reason to change. The guides concurred; during late July and August, hoppers are arguably the only flies you need. Other patterns that work well are the Stimulator, MadamX, and Turk's Tarantula. The key is to use flies that float well and can survive the mouths of several fish, because that's what happens on the Middle Fork—you hook several fish!

Parachute Hopper



Hook: Dry fly, sizes 10-12
Thread: Black
Ribbing: Fine copper wire
Wings: Turkey quill
Post: Calf tail
Legs: Pheasant tail
Hackle: Grizzly

As far as tackle goes, if you float with Tightlines, they supply all the gear, including rods, if you so wish, I don't know a fly fisher who doesn't want to use his or her own gear, with the possible exception of neophytes, so for rods, 4- or 5-weight systems are adequate. A floating line and a spool of 4X and 5X tippet are all you need. Since all the fishing is done from the drift boats, no waders are needed. A pair of wading or river shoes come in handy when fishing around camp and for traction while standing in the drift boats.

CAMP LIFE

When the fishing boats arrived at camp each day, the gear boat had already arrived and tents had been set up, complete with cots. All we had to do was grab our dry bag, choose the tent of our liking, stow our gear, and relax. cold beer and ice could be found in coolers down by the cooking station, and lounge chairs and snacks awaited the weary anglers' arrival. Other camp luxuries included his and her portable toilets, a portable shower, and a wash-up station with plenty of hot water.

There are many established campsites along the course of the Middle Fork. Some camps are nestled in the pines; all have a river view. The camps have one thing in common: when you arrive, there is no sign that anyone has camped there before you. River rules require all campers to use fire pans (eliminating any residue from cooking) and carry out all ashes, trash, and human waste. With every group practicing this, the camps were pristine.



Once all the fishing boats were in camp, the guides switched gears and helped in the preparation of dinner. This was no small task, as dinners on a Helfrich trip are quite elaborate. No corners or expenses are cut when it comes to meals. Over the course of our float, we had such entrées as rack of lamb, prime rib, and fried chicken. One afternoon halfway through our float, fresh ahi tuna and ice cream were flown into one of the airstrips for a prearranged pickup. Fresh desserts were made each day, some in Dutch ovens—a special treat. Breakfasts were equally impressive, with eggs Benedict, pancakes, omelets to order, fresh fruits, juices, and more.

Once off the river, guests indulged in cocktails and snacks, visiting, reading, snoozing, or whatever they felt like doing. good drink, good fare, and good company were all the social lubricants needed to coax a couple of energetic brothers passionate about juggling into a performance. Every spare moment while in camp they could be seen somewhere with pins flying. I kept looking for the rest of the circus, but it never did arrive.

Once the hors d'oeuvres hit the tables I really had to pace myself, well aware of the feast to follow.

HOT SPRINGS AND OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Scattered along the course of the river there are a few hot springs that get plenty of use by river floaters. A quick soak, or shower, depending on the spring, is welcome to most who pass by. Some of the hot springs are located right along the river; others require a short hike to get to. They are a fun and refreshing break from the river routine.

The Flying "B" Ranch is an oasis we reached on a sweltering 90-degree afternoon. Nearly every floater on the river visits the small store, where we found cold drinks, the usual snack and gift items, and ice-cream bars. After a few days on the river, with no way to get out of the heat, I would have paid \$5 for an ice-cream bar. In fact, I think I did!

For those with an interest in photography, the spectacular scenery in the river canyon will put blisters on your shutter finger. With towering crags, raging rapids, and wildlife, there is plenty to shoot. Keep in mind that with this rugged, authentic beauty comes the natural need for caution. This is rattlesnake country. Anytime you venture on or off the trail, keep a keen eye out for these slithering critters. You're a long way from help, though medavacs are available. We watched one rescue in progress for a gentleman from another party who was allergic to bees and unknowingly got stung.

THE END DRAWS NEAR

On our last night on the river, our camp community converged on a small, white-sand beach. This was a tight-quarters camp, not necessarily cramped, but the skinniest camp of our float. It's a good thing that we all knew each other by then. It always amazes me how a shared outdoor experience forges fast friendships. The wilderness adventure introduces genuine, good-natured folks.

Another great meal cooked to perfection and another night of sitting around looking at the stars drew our camp life to a close. The next morning we would have a half day of floating, though several technical rapids, before reaching our take-out at Cache Bar Landing, on the main fork of the Salmon River.

During our float there were several large fires burning in central Idaho. When we awoke on our last morning, smoke hung thick in the air, and we could barely see the distant ridges. As we make our way downriver the veil of smoke got heavier, obscuring the cliff tops above.

The buses were waiting for us when we arrived at Cache Bar. As we drove out, we encountered Firefighter crew along the way. an immense base camp with choppers busily transported crews and dipped water from the Salmon River. Fires could be seen burning on several ridge tops. When we got back to "civilization," we heard the report that lightning had started the central Idaho fires.

After an hour or so of traveling in the bus we were delivered to our car, waiting for us at North Fork. Others in the group went on to Salmon, where their cars were parked. A quick dip into the store for an ice-cream bar, and we were on the road again.

Great trips tend to bring a post party depression. We drove in silence for a ways, reflecting on the week that had just passed. Then one of us make a comment about something that happened on the river, which led to something else, and before long we were chattering and reliving the entire week-over and over again-all the way home. ➡

Join Jeff Helfrich on the Middle Fork Salmon River in the River of No Return Wilderness for the trout fishing adventure of a lifetime.

▶ **TO RESERVE YOUR DATE & SPACE CLICK HERE >>**

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Middle Fork Salmon River NOTEBOOK



When: July - September

Where: Central Idaho, in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness.

Appropriate gear: 4- and 5-wt., rods, floating lines, 9ft. leaders tapered to 5X.

Useful fly patterns: Hoppers, Stimulators, more hoppers.

Necessary accessories: Polarized sunglasses, glasses strap, large billed hat, sunscreen, quick-dry clothes, river shoes, dry bag and nerves of steel.

Nonresidence license: \$12/day, \$22.50/2 days, \$33/3 days, \$43.75/7 days, \$61.50 annual.

Guides/outfitters: Jeff Helfrich Outfitters, Tight Lines Fishing & Rafting (877) 855-6270

Books/maps: Impassable Canyon: Journey Down the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, photography by Matt Leidecker; The Middle Fork of the Salmon: A Wild and Scenic River (map and guide) by the U.S. Forest Service; Idaho Atlas & Gazetteer by DeLorme Mapping




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