



## Paradise on Armstrong Creek



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**Lately I've been exploring spring creeks around the world and how to fish them. I've become so enamored; I even wrote an article about three endangered streams in New York State, published in Fly Fisherman Magazine. When I travel, I like to combine trips to destinations like the International Fly Fishing Fair and sneak-in some fishing. The last time I attended, it was held in Livingston, Montana. Livingston is a college town with character and some history. It is home of the headquarters of the International Federation of Fly Fishers, famous authors, Jim Harrison and Tom McGuane and several artists and chefs. It also has the famous Dan Bailey's Fly Shop and George Anderson's Yellowstone Angler for guidance and equipment.**

The railroad and the Yellowstone River run right through town and just down the road is Paradise Valley. This valley is located between the Absaroka Range on the east and the Gallatin Range on the west. Here you have a choice of fishing three spring creeks on private ranches who charge a daily rod fee. These are DePuy Spring Creek, Armstrong Creek and Nelson's Spring Creek. It's best to get reservations in advance because they aren't very big and can get busy. There is no stocking because of the natural reproduction.

I planned to go to the Fair in Livingston held in the middle of August and decided to fish Armstrong Creek on the O'Hair Ranch for my first time. I

decided to fish there on my own for all my three open days, since it has the biggest flow. I wanted to figure-out the conditions myself, instead of jumping around and touring all three creeks. At this time of the season, I was hoping to catch the PMD and trico hatches, which would be well into their seasons.

Spring creeks are usually low gradient and high in PH, making them ideal for vegetative and aquatic insect growth. The ground water sources are more constant in temperature and flow than those of freestone rivers and provide more days of growth for its fish. In comparison, spring creeks are usually warmer than freestones in winter and cooler than freestones in summer. This all helps trout flourish.

Since most of the length of a typical spring creek runs slowly and is often unshaded, wild fish can be difficult to catch. Under these conditions, the fish have more time to inspect your flies and there is not much to break your outline. On the other hand, small commercial waters can be so overfished, the fish become habituated to humans. They might not be easy to catch because they shun flies, leaders and casts, even though they are often unafraid of wading humans.

To catch trout on medium to large spring creeks, it's best to use long leaders and long fine tippets to avoid detection. To prevent breaking fine tippets, let's say, 7X or .10mm diameter, I recommend lighter rod and line weights. Also your rod action should have enough shock absorbency, in at least the tip section, to help protect the tippet from breakage. Also, using the smallest line-weight you can get away with, can help make your presentation less conspicuous.

I read an unconventional book specifically about fishing in Paradise Valley, titled, *The Rainbows of Paradise*, by John Mingo. It features technical indicator nymphing with a two-weight line on a three weight rod. The premise is; two-weight rods are usually 8 foot long but there are 9 foot three weights. More length helps with casting distance and mending. I stole his idea for my dry fly fishing instead. I paired a soft 9 foot three weight with a two-weight Sci-Angler GPX line, which is really about a 2 1/2 weight. The outfit casts and mends beautifully and the rod cushions all but the most savage strikes.

The first day I fished Armstrong, I headed to the big slow pool at the downstream end of the property and ran into my friend Willy George from the Golden Gate Club. I didn't want to crowd him so I made the move

upstream ahead of the other anglers filtering-in. I wanted to start-off with some of John Mingo's nymph techniques in the fast water as a baseline, before tackling the afternoon emergences on the very slow water downstream. I caught a few rainbows before any mayflies emerged. I unhooked a really big one but she escaped when I tried to take a wet photo.

Toward mid-day, size 22 creamsicle colored sulphurs unexpectedly started swimming to the surface and the fish followed them out of the water like missiles. I couldn't imitate the right combination of fly and action to match what the fish wanted. I left my sulphur parachutes at home and they probably wanted winged wet-flies. It was very frustrating.

The second day I went down to the Yellowstone angler and got the right flies. When I came back, some anglers were stationed in the easier to fish fast water. Willy was over at DePuy instead and I had the big pool to myself and the two resident white swans. The bottom was very mucky and weeds grew to the surface. There were two areas with deeper channels with downed woody debris in the water. I keyed-in on these as big fish holding areas. I found it odd I only encountered browns in the slow water and 100 yards upstream in the faster water, were only rainbows.

A great PMD hatch started-up and all the fish were feeding greedily. The overcast sky helped make the hatch more intense. The fish hardly had to move side to side to intercept the floating mayflies. All they had to do was nod. I found that certain fish liked a floating nymph and others liked an upright dun imitation. I was using a duck quill No-hackle to imitate the dun.

While I was drying one out by false casting, I accidentally caught a cedar waxwing who thought my fly was a meal. The fluttering bird landed in the drink. I unhooked it and tried drying it off, then let it rest on my rod for a while. I thought it was ready to fly, so I gave my rod a little shake but when the bird tried to fly, it didn't quite make it to the bank. I watched it float down where the creek shallows into a riffle and turns, but saw no more. I was stuck in the muck and I wouldn't have been able to save it. Next time, I'll walk a damp bird all the way to the bank before releasing it.

I tried casting to a fish from behind while facing upstream but it'd seen leaders before and spooked. I then tried casting across the current, landing the fly a few feet above them and they didn't like that either. They saw my line and 14ft leader in the air and reacted by moving over a few feet closer

to the bank to a new feeding lane and continued feeding. I had to get further upstream of the cautious fish and make a fly-first drift to fool them. It worked on almost every fish. I also found I had fewer refusals on 7X tippet than 6X.

On my third and last day under a clear blue sky, I headed right down to the big slow pool. Around 11 am, the PMD hatch started again but was not as intense as the previous day's. This made the fish move more laterally to intercept enough mayflies because there were fewer of them. The big trout chased the smaller ones away entirely to maintain a wide feeding zone. The smaller ones were sixteen to eighteen inches. I saw a monster downstream that was dominating all the other fish but when I floated my fly down, quicker fish ate my fly instead. I decided to get closer.

When I tried to move into better position to make my cast, two 18 inch long rainbows came into the mud plume just feet away to catch any nymphs I dislodged. That's when I realized these fish were kind of tame. I could see the tail of the monster sticking up out of the water and made my cast. It acted like a male. My dun floated nicely but when the fish ate it, it exploded and broke-off instantly. At least I fooled it.

It took me three days to gain the trust of the swans who bugled at me the previous two. The only thing was they floated silently several feet away, just tagging along. Luckily the trout weren't afraid of them whatsoever. A baby beaver paid me a social visit twice, then rejoined its mother who observed. It was a pretty serene trip and I was sharing it with a new friend at a casting event at West Point when I realized a big coincidence.

I had met U.S. Army Major Ryan Travis. He's an Executive Officer and also faculty advisor to the West Point Fly Fishing Club. His dad Tom owned a fly shop in Livingston when Ryan was growing up and they both guided. His father, co-authored the book, Fly Fishing the Yellowstone River, An Angler's Guide, WestWinds Press 1995 with Rod Walinchus. Ryan also worked as the Armstrong Creek stream-keeper and shared a tail I think any angler would relish. He said he had to fish mice flies at night in order to catch and remove big predatory browns. He said one was almost 15 pounds. This would help the smaller fish survive. Since we met, Ryan and I have explored some water in New York state for his Cadets to fish and I look forward to doing more teaching there as well.