



The Ranch



©John Field 2014 | First published by Sexyloops, Tuesday, 6 October 2015

The Henry's Fork of the Snake River is an iconic river for its history, fish and difficult currents. Since Jason Borger put the bug in my head that it was a tough river to dry fly fish, I knew I wanted to go there and hone my skills in those conditions. For ten years I read three great books and several articles on these waters and fished the waters of Yellowstone a few times before I arrived in Idaho.

I became quite a fan of Rene Harrop, the fly designer, retired guide and author from St. Anthony, ID. His books, *Trout Hunter* and *Learning from the Water*, embody his natural approach to wild things influenced by being part Native American. I use many of the tying materials his family makes and sells at the House of Harrop, which sounds more like a fashion brand than a fly business.

I tie most of my own flies but when I travel and I'm learning new water with unfamiliar insects and patterns, I get samples of the best flies to use and copy later. The No-Hackle fly first developed by Carl Richards and Doug Swisher in the 1970s, is a staple to the Henry's Fork and I had not tied the PMD, Mahogany and trico in this style before hand and wanted to get samples tied by the Harrops. I didn't even pack my tying kit.

I planned to go to Last Chance, Idaho for five days and fish before giving a workshop at the FFF Conclave in West Yellowstone, Montana. I had my

sights on The Harriman Ranch since it contains some of the best pools and glides on the Henry's Fork.

Many locals call it the Railroad Ranch or just the Ranch but it's now the Harriman State Park, after Roland and W. Averell Harriman; sons of the railroad tycoon, E.H Harriman, who donated this property in 1977 to the state of Idaho. This 11,000 acre park is located in the Henry's Fork Caldera and like other places in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, it contains underground springs.

The source of the Fork is Big Springs in Island Park, Idaho and produces 120 million gallons a day! Since the Henry's Fork is also a source for irrigation, water is stored in reservoirs and used for agriculture. This causes flow changes throughout the growing and fishing season. The lowest river levels are late summer through winter and many aquatic weeds have grown to the surface and present some additional fishing and wading challenges. My trip was in late September and the water was low.

I flew into Bozeman and rented an SUV, then drove to West Yellowstone to rent a mountain bike, since there are bike trails on the Ranch that get you into the heart of it and away from the parking lots. I drove the thirty-four minute drive to Last Chance, ID, also known as Island Park.

I checked into a lodge that also has a fly shop. I was looking forward to getting some of the Harrop family flies since it was their exclusive local dealer. But I was disappointed to see the bins empty. I was especially anxious to get their No-hackles. A salesperson laughed and said, they're empty by the end of July! So I asked if I could buy some mallard wing quills, or whole wings to tie my own and they said nobody local carried them. I bought a bobbin, dubbing, three colors of thread, hooks and some Coq De Leon tailing as a start. I knew I could find duck quills in West Yellowstone, so I turned around and went back to shop!

I went into three shops and found enough wings with enough good quills for my purposes. I stopped-in to ask my friend Bob Jacklin if I could borrow a vise and he provided one. I left five vises and a few mallard wings back home in Connecticut.

When I got all my materials and tools, I returned to my hotel room to spend my arrival afternoon tying so I'd be ready for the next day. I first had to cut

off the quills, wash some blood off them and steam them, since the feathers were crushed. I went into the housekeeping utility room across the hall and borrowed a steaming iron to use on my quills. The feathers opened up nicely so I could make lifelike wings. I tied a dozen each of olives, tricos and Mahoganies.

That night, I was hot in the room even though the heat was off and had to open sliding glass doors to sleep comfortably. Unfortunately, people gathered below my room smoking and spoke loudly after a few drinks. It was amateur band night in the bar under my room and at 1am I got dressed and went down stairs to ask them to stop. The door to the bar was locked but someone drunk and loud inside kept wailing for another hour. The first morning I was tired but determined.

I loaded my bike into my rental SUV and drove down to my bike trail to explore a great section of water. I put on my waders and backpack and entered through a cattle gate and closed it behind me. The Ranch is still used for graze land and cattle are present almost everywhere. I bike a quarter mile, crossed the river on a bridge and continued to my first pool. I stood there and watched the water and could see some distant anglers and rising fish. After setting up, I entered the water and saw that some tricos were coming off. There was hardly any wind. I tied one on and started working upstream and approached a few fish. First off, I noticed how wild and spooky they are. That was my first lesson.

I was casting on an angle upstream to fish feeding along a cut-bank thirty when suddenly I heard splashing about an eight of a mile downstream and saw an angler in a cowboy hat wrangling a steelhead-sized trout. After he released it, the man waded upstream in my direction silhouetted by the bank and almost invisible to fish holding off the bank. He was using the bank as camouflage, had the ideal approach angle on the tail of big bank feeders and had negligible drag on his upstream casts. He kindly exited and walked around me to avoid spooking my fish and reentered a polite distance upstream. I caught a few fish and he quietly waded ahead selecting big noses to cast to. He was only focused on the fish ahead, not the ones he spooked behind. I continued upstream for the rest of day and languished in the beauty of the weather, the river and the sight of the distant Teton Mountains.

The next day was very windy and many of the guides were standing out front

looking for something to do. Most of them use drift boats and float where few waders will conflict with their activities. Floating also makes up for angler shortcomings and almost guarantees some fish. I wanted to wade in the slower water and choose which fish I presented to. As I was leaving the parking lot, I saw Rene Harrop for my first time and he was driving, I believe, an old 70s white Ford pickup truck in nice condition.

I drove down to Woods Road and there was a huge fish hitting emerging insects midstream out of reach in deeper water. I waded upstream and wind was terrible and the water had waves on it. What I did realize was that in between the floating weed beds, the surface was still and I could see fish. I used these pockets and caught some nice fish and they didn't seem to see me. Each day had tricos, olives, Mahoganies and fish. I caught a couple rainbows over 20 inches.

This entire trip was a challenge and a learning experience. When I first arrived, I thought I'd fail but I worked through it and had a great experience.